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Drinking Alcohol Before and During Pregnancy Can Harm a Baby April is Alcohol Awareness Month

Lincoln—Sixty percent of Nebraska women who give birth report drinking alcohol during the three months before pregnancy—a time that is important to a baby's future growth and development.

"Women who are pregnant or who are trying to get pregnant should avoid drinking alcohol," said Dr. Joseph Acierno, the state's Chief Medical Officer and director of the Division of Public Health in the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. "Alcohol can cause problems for an unborn baby throughout pregnancy, including before the woman knows she's pregnant. In fact, four out of five don't realize they're pregnant until the fourth week of pregnancy or later."

If a woman who has been drinking suspects she is pregnant, the best thing she can do is quit drinking immediately and talk to her doctor, Dr. Acierno said. The sooner a woman stops drinking, the better it will be for both her baby and herself.

The results of drinking during pregnancy can be fetal alcohol spectrum disorders in a child. These effects can include physical, behavioral, and learning problems. Physical abnormalities can include a small head size, shorter-than-average height and low body weight. Other signs are hyperactivity, poor coordination, poor memory, learning disabilities, speech and language delays and low IQ. These disorders can be prevented if a woman does not drink alcohol during pregnancy.

"If you are pregnant or trying to get pregnant and can't stop drinking, get help," said Scot Adams, director of the DHHS Division of Behavioral Health. "Contact your doctor, local Alcoholics Anonymous or an alcoholism treatment center."

For local AA chapters and alcoholism treatment centers, see the Network of Care website at www.dhhs.ne.gov/networkofcare.